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The Matrix: Zen in the Art of Being Bulletproof Part 1

We do not interact directly with the world. Rather, we *interpret* the world and interact with our interpretation. **The Matrix** engages this concept by presenting a vision of the world as an interactive illusion, where those still plugged into its ‘virtual reality’ can either continue to take the world at face value or wake up to the truth. And whether or not one decides to accept the illusory nature of reality affects what is possible for one’s life and self. However, the film considers the problem of recognizing the world as unreal and our deep resistance to it as it traumatizes our sense of identity. **The Matrix** uses the concept of an unreal world, and our ability to change our perception of the world, to examine the nature of identity and what it means to be authentic. How do you know yourself in a world that does not exist? Actually, the film suggests recognizing reality as an illusion is the key to truly knowing yourself. The film does so by exploring the maladaptive, self-protecting behaviours we adopt in the attempt to be bulletproof from the pain of reality and being alive, and uses a vast intersection of texts, philosophies, and spiritual teachings to advocate the reality of the self is not lost in an unreal world. Instead, when absolute reality no longer dictates the meaning of the world, and ourselves, there is complete freedom of self-definition. The only way to truly be bulletproof is to know and believe in yourself more than you believe in reality. But, we must first take a short detour into linguistics...

The way we navigate and make meaning of the world around us and communicate with others is by reading and interpreting signs. The term “signs” will probably bring to mind traffic signs like stop signs and traffic lights. These *are* signs, but a sign can also take the form of just about anything: words, sounds, colours, shapes, images and pictures, logos, even animals. Essentially, a sign is anything that stands for, or refers to, something else. A sign is comprised of two elements: the sign itself and the signified (also called a referent) which is the object or concept the sign refers to. The word ‘fish,’ for example, is a sign that refers to an aquatic creature. A real fish would be the signified of the sign ‘fish’ (the word itself), but, because there are thousands of specific species of fish, for example you may read ‘fish’ and think of a goldfish whereas someone else may think of salmon or carp, the word refers more generally to a *concept* of an aquatic creature rather than a particular being. ‘Fish’ also carries various symbolic meanings: the fish is often used as a symbol for

Jesus (in turn referencing a parable in the bible), and has other meanings in different cultures, for instance Eastern belief systems associate fish with creation and transformation, and the Celtic tradition associates fish with wisdom and prophecy. The word may also evoke personal associations, emotions and experiences, for instance an avid fisher or professional sailor would no doubt have a very different relationship to the word 'fish' than someone who's afraid of water (aquaphobia exists!). In addition, there's nothing about the sign 'fish' – the enunciation, the form, shape or appearance of the word, the letters themselves etc. – that directly relates to the living thing, so the choice of the word 'fish' to refer to a real fish is somewhat arbitrary and random. In fact, this arbitrariness is an essential characteristic of all signs. So, the idiom of communication being 'an art' is profoundly accurate: the mountain of potential meanings in *each* word or sign is staggering, and the fact that all signs are associated to those many meanings *by chance* makes effective communication and interpretation rather a miracle. Ultimately, meaning is a matter of individual perception rather than something absolute and definite. **The Matrix** takes this concept of perception versus reality to its limit as the basis to suggest the illusory nature of the world we *assume* is real. But it also takes the absence of absolute meaning as the basis upon which is found individual freedom as it opens the possibility of self-realization and frees us from the pain of the world limiting what we feel we can or cannot do or be.

One of the major intertexts in the film is the work of French philosopher and sociologist Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard is explicitly referenced first when Neo retrieves a disc from a hollow book titled *Simulacra and Simulation*, written by Baudrillard, and again when Morpheus, in the Construct, explains to Neo what has become of the 'real world.' Morpheus quotes Baudrillard when he says "Welcome, to the desert of the real" (a direct quote from *Simulacra and Simulation*).

Unsurprisingly, the book was also required reading for the principle cast. **The Matrix** narrativizes Baudrillard's concepts of "hyperreality" and "simulacra" (though imperfectly). A simulacrum can best be described as a copy of a copy of a copy to such a degree that the original is lost, and the copies pass as authentic even though they don't share any of the substance or qualities of the original – it's like looking at a jpeg of the Mona Lisa on Google that was scanned from a post card and thinking it's equivalent to seeing the real painting. A simulacrum is essentially a sign with no referent where the absence of the referent is not noticed.





Hyperreality is a related concept that suggests we experience everything through, usually technological, mediation. In other words, our technologies filter every event and experience in our lives, to the degree that our minds are unable to tell the difference between reality and virtual representation. Thus, watching CNN becomes indistinguishable from being in a warzone. That may seem like an exaggeration, but it is precisely Baudrillard's claim. Baudrillard wrote a book titled *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, not because he doesn't believe it happened, but because the war was experienced primarily through TV screens and RADAR: combat missions were planned on 'intelligence' gathered from maps, satellite images and news casts rather than intel gathered personally by agents, and combat was mediated with technologically enhanced weapons and virtually no hand-to-hand combat or contact with the enemy. Baudrillard contends there was indeed much violence but the 'War' itself did not happen, rather it was "an atrocity masquerading as war." In *Simulacra and Simulation* Baudrillard argues that our "reality" has been replaced by empty, non-signifying representations and signs of reality that hide the fact that reality no longer exists, and because our culture is one of hyperreality we have no means to be able to tell reality has been lost. Baudrillard uses the metaphor of a map, suggesting we no longer live on a territory, but on the map of that territory whilst still believing we are on the territory itself, and underneath the map the territory is rotting and fading away – creating the desert of the real. This is presented in ***The Matrix*** when Morpheus explains to Neo the real world was destroyed in a war with the machines (notably the "desert" Morpheus shows Neo is a computer generated image in the Construct as well), and although it is 2199, the 'real world' Neo knows is a re-construction of the world in 1999. The 'real world' is a reproduction of the past, and the world it *refers* to is a pile of dust. Even the actual real world through which Morpheus and his crew navigate their ship is the decaying, abandoned tunnels of an old free-human holdout, and the last human city of Zion is never seen (I do not count the sequels). Baudrillard refers to this kind of simulacrum and hyperreality as the "liquidation of all referentials" – there is no longer any meaning in the world, everything is a sign pointing to nothing except back to itself.



The liquidation of referentials can be seen in the Matrix city Neo initially takes to be his real home. There are many signs the city is Chicago, home of the film's sibling directors the Wachowskis. The opening "trace program" that searches Neo's phone number shows the area code as 3_2: 312 is the area code of Chicago, and is the area code printed in the original script. In addition, all the street corners named in the film are real intersections in Chicago, and all the city maps seen, for instance on the subway platform wall, are also of Chicago. However, the city itself is never explicitly named; instead the language used to identify the city is wholly non-referential. In Agent Smith's files during Neo's interrogation, the city named in Neo's records is "Capital City, USA" and his address specifies that he lives in Lower Downtown. It also seems to be an empty city, which for a major metropolitan area gives it an "unreal" quality. There are very few extras used in the film, and the only substantially populated scene in the city is the chase through the market near the end (the only other populated scene turns out to take place in the Construct during the Agent training program).

During the opening rooftop-chase sequence as Trinity flees an Agent and several police officers, the skyline includes landmarks from Nashville, Tennessee and San Francisco, California. Both cities were locations for some filming, but the majority of the production took place in Australia, never filming in Chicago at all. Even the rooftop sets themselves are recycled from the 1998 film *Dark City*, which is very closely related to *The Matrix*. Not unlike *The Matrix*, the city in *Dark City* is not real; it's a constructed, free floating planet of its own. In addition, the city is remarkably fluid and the beings that secretly run this strange human rat trap change around buildings, streets and the inhabitants' identities every night. Just like in *The Matrix*, the "city" is not what it appears to be on the surface, it is a fraud. Suggesting the "lost referent" nature of 'Capital City,' the film even has built in copies of copies: not only is the city itself revealed to be the "copy" of a real city from 1999, along the walls of the private offices in Metacortex, the company Neo works for, are framed pictures of a city skyline – mimicking the skyline outside the office windows. And as if tipping off the joke, while Neo evades the Agents he passes by a co-worker using a photocopier. The sets are filled with signs of a real city, but the mirage of the real evaporates as soon as you get close. In fact this is the formal strategy of the film which is

almost entirely pre-fabricated: the film is made up of references, allusions, quotations and recycled images, shots, and aesthetics from other films, television shows, books, philosophies, religions, and spiritual traditions. It adds to the sense that nothing is original or authentic in the Matrix, rather it is unreal, staged, and re-created.

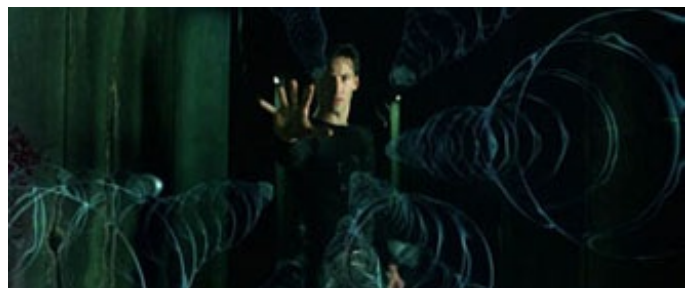
Another way the film challenges the notion of what's real is by revealing seemingly solid objects to be pliable, almost liquid like. The best example in the film is during the sequence when Neo and Trinity save Morpheus from the Agents' interrogation, and their helicopter crashes into the side of a skyscraper. When the helicopter slams into the glass wall, the extreme slow motion, called 'bullet-time', shows the glass "ripple" outwards in a perfect circle as if it were a stone thrown into water, and the glass shatters behind the ripple. The slow-motion bullets in 'bullet-time' create liquid-like ripples in the air.



Concrete cuts like butter when Agent Smith punches through it and every fight sequence devastates the physical surroundings. The world seems incredibly breakable. In the film's critic commentary, one of the speakers calls this the "liquifaction of solid things," appropriately, as water is a major motif in the film.



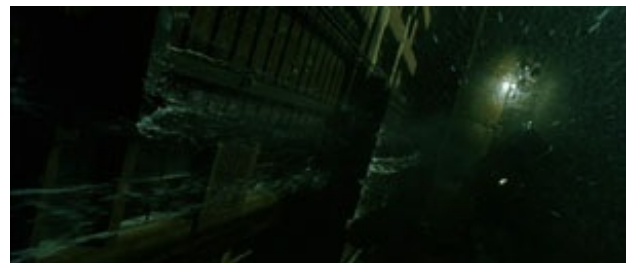
Water shows up everywhere: it rains heavily, water pours in a sheet over the side of the bridge Neo waits under, after being unplugged Neo is 'washed' into a large pool of water, the fire sprinklers flood the room where the Agents interrogate Morpheus and when Neo shatters the window the water pours down the side of the building. Even the sound effect that accompanies the "falling" Matrix code is digitized raindrops, and the falling code itself looks like rain and is imitated by the soapy water being wiped off the Metacortex office windows the morning Neo is late for work. And like water, the



Matrix is infinitely pliable, walls show up where windows used to be. Agents float in and out of people's bodies, a small metal tracker becomes an bio-tech bug which becomes a metal object again. This pliability is an essential property of water, not simply because in liquid form it finds its own level and following gravity will flow easily around, under or through anything, but it can change from liquid to solid to vapour infinitely. This liquid pliability is also a formal technique of the film, in the Matrix the camera passes through windows and walls, and it flies and dives with no concept of gravity. Comparatively, on board the Nebuchadnezzar the camera strictly tracks around objects and people, and only once leaves the ground. Unlike in the Matrix where it is a free "ghost," on the ship the camera is real, solid, and tied down. Time is also pliable in the Matrix: it is perpetually 1999, time is slowed down and stretched with 'bullet-time,' and the Oracle can predict the future and in so doing folds it into the present.



In the Taoist tradition water is associated with divine wisdom as it always finds the path of least resistance, but also with the subconscious and the mind itself. This association comes from the pliability of the mind and its ability to shape the world it perceives. This kind of mental pliability is actualized when Neo goes to visit the Oracle and encounters a young boy bending spoons simply by looking at them. The young boy tells him: "Do not try to bend the spoon, that's impossible. Instead, only try to realize the truth. ... There is no spoon. ... Then you will see it is not the spoon that bends, it is only yourself." This is a re-working of a



Buddhist parable wherein two monks walking to temple see a flag waving in the wind and stop to discuss the nature of its movement. One monk believes it is the flag that moves, the other believes it is the wind. As they speak a master passes by and they stop him to ask "Is it the wind or the flag that moves?" to which the master replies, "It is neither the wind nor the flag that moves, it is your mind." This notion of the pliability of the mind, of our perception, and in turn the ability of our perceptions to then shape the world we perceive

around us, is a major motif in many of the world's wisdom and spiritual traditions and is essential to understanding *The Matrix*. As Morpheus reiterates to Neo, our concept and understanding of reality has little to do with objective, outside reality (if that even exists):

“What is real? How do you define real? If you’re talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see then ‘real’ is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain.” Like Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality, we do not have direct interaction with reality, and that’s even without factoring in the mass amount of technological mediation with experience nowadays. We literally shape the world and reality with our minds and our perception.



This is mirrored formally by the film: there are many vanishing point compositions throughout *The Matrix*. A vanishing point is used in drawings, paintings, and other visual arts, and is the point at which two parallel lines appear to join in the distance. This was a technique first used in the Renaissance by painters like Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael to create more “realistic” works.

Here are some familiar examples:

And some famous examples in Renaissance art:





The purpose of the vanishing point is to replicate how human vision functions when perceiving a 3-dimensional plane: reality. Parallel lines do not touch or join; however, depth perception, the ability to gauge the distance between objects in an environment, is crucial to human vision as it enable us to accurately navigate the physical world. Depth perception is possible because human vision is binocular, meaning we have two eyes which simultaneously perceive two different perspectives which are combined in the mind to create a single, continuous image (try holding a pen in front of your right eye and alternate

closing only your left eye and then only your right eye – the pen will appear to move, and looking at it with both eyes is a combination of those two perspectives). This visual phenomenon creates the *perception* that parallel lines join at a distance even though in reality they do not. The replication of “realistic” perspective was a technique for painters to direct the eyes’ focus in the painting: Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* is a wonderful example as the vanishing point of the image converges behind Jesus’ head, ensuring he is the focal point of the painting. These kinds of compositions are also widely used in ***The Matrix***’s close cousin ***Dark City*** – which also deals with the nature of reality, identity and their relationship to our perception of ourselves and the world we live in. In addition, images from the outside world hit our retina upside-down, and it is our brain that automatically turns this image right-side-up without us ever being aware there’s a filtering process happening (in fact there are several). We are not seeing with our eyes, though we experience it that way, the image we see is actually inside of our minds, not in front of us. This “filtering” process is formally mirrored with the use of colour tints on the camera, the *Matrix* scenes are filmed with a coloured filter that gives a green hue to the illusory world. Like Baudrillard’s hyperreality, we believe we are directly experiencing reality but are unaware of the many technological and virtual filters that separate us from that reality. We do not see the world; we see our perception of the world. We take the sign of a thing to be that very thing, but it’s not: as Baudrillard says “the sign effaces the thing,” because it is a *sign* we perceive and interpret, and never the thing itself – which, according to Baudrillard, doesn’t exist anyway.

This all seems to be getting dangerously close to suggesting the world does not exist. Which is exactly what Baudrillard suggests, but the film shies from Baudrillard’s nihilism. Baudrillard himself has commented on the film and, rather bluntly, said “***The Matrix*** is surely the kind of film about the Matrix that the Matrix would have been able to produce.” According to Baudrillard, ***The Matrix***’s major error is although it reveals the world we take to be real as an illusion, it still holds that reality exists outside of the Matrix. For Baudrillard the essential quality of the simulacrum is it *hides* that reality no longer exists, in

any form. For example, Baudrillard describes Los Angeles as a city “which is no longer anything but an immense scenario and a perpetual pan shot,” a city which is surrounded by “imaginary stations” like Marine World and Disneyland which are places “presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and



the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation.” Baudrillard says that in contrast to his theory of simulacrum, *The Matrix* deals with simulation with the “Platonic treatment,” referencing the philosophies of Plato. Plato holds there is a higher, “fundamental” reality, a world of



“ideals” (called Forms) we do not experience. Instead the world we perceive with our senses is made up of the shadows of those real Forms. For example, there is an ideal Form of a tree, the most wholly perfect tree in existence, but every tree we see in our world, beautiful as it might be, is only a shadow of the magnificent, flawless tree Form. For Baudrillard, the mistake is believing in any form of reality. He says “The radical illusion of the world is a problem faced by all great cultures” but because we do not know how to mourn the loss of the real, or deal with its disappearance, every culture solves this problem “through art and symbolization” which convinces us of reality’s existence.

Rather than explore the non-existence of reality, the film avoids the nihilism of confronting the absence of reality by depicting the Matrix as a dream world: a dream we can wake up from to encounter reality. Morpheus describes the Matrix this way when he tells Neo, “You’ve been living in a dream world.” And just as Neo is about to be unplugged, Morpheus again suggests the Matrix is more like a dream than a simulacrum when he says “Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream? How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?” Here Morpheus indicates the Matrix has been able to fool everyone almost seamlessly because “reality” is a constructed perception of our minds, not unlike a dream. There is an almost obsession with “waking up” in the film. In fact there are seven distinct scenes where Neo awakens from sleep, and the phrases “Wake up” and “Get up” are repeated. The name Morpheus itself is a reference to the Greek god of dreams, who often appeared in the dreams of men as a messenger from the gods. Finally, when Neo initially meets Morpheus, Morpheus observes that Neo has “the look of a man who accepts what he sees because he’s expecting to wake up. Ironically, this is not far from the truth.” In fact, after Neo has been unplugged from the Matrix, Morpheus greets Neo with “Welcome, to the real world.” Clearly, then, the film holds that reality is still a potential.



So what is real in the film? The illusory matrix world certainly isn't, but paradoxically, the "real world" isn't exactly real either: Zion itself is never seen, the tunnels the ship navigates are the decaying remains of a previous free-human settlement, and even the ship itself is little more than clunky, inelegant machinery crowding out the humans on board who always seem marginalized and dwarfed by the technology on the ship. In fact, in the "real world," humans appear disturbingly machine-like: they have plugs, knowledge is downloaded into their minds, and Tank even calls Neo "some machine." The answer to what is real is, perhaps counter-intuitively, a little more intangible. Reality does not appear as a *place* in the film. Rather reality is more closely associated with a notion of spirituality. The Matrix and the machines are associated with fake, *artificial* intelligence, *programming* and *simulated* reality, all boiling down to a few lines of bright green code on a computer screen. By comparison, the "real world" is strongly connected to spiritual beliefs and references to different religions, mostly in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The name Zion for the last human city refers to Mount Zion in Jerusalem: a place of worship and site of the "World to Come," a land promised to believers following the Rapture. The name Trinity partially references the Christian Holy Trinity, made up of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, each being a part of God and yet God entire and whole unto themselves. Unsurprisingly, the number three is meaningful in Christianity and is found everywhere in ***The Matrix***: Morpheus, Neo and Trinity make up a kind of Holy Trinity themselves; there are three Agents; the opening of the film finds Trinity in Room 303 of the Heart O' the City Hotel, to which Neo returns at the end of the film; and the subway platform where Neo fights Agent Smith has 3 painted on the columns.

Another Christian reference appears in the name of Morpheus's ship the Nebuchadnezzar, a king in the bible who is troubled by a dream he does not understand, not unlike the dream world of the Matrix Neo does not understand. Daniel explains to the king his dream means the only indestructible and ultimately real kingdom is one created by God, and the dream is also a prediction that God will destroy all existing false kingdoms to create this one – not unlike Morpheus's belief Neo will be able to free humankind and destroy the illusory Matrix world to leave only the real, true world of Zion. But, the most significant, and pervasive, Christian reference is the aligning of Neo as a Jesus-like, or Messiah figure.

Morpheus believes Neo is “The One” whose coming has been prophesized will save humans from the machines; Jesus is also described as “the one who is to come” in both the books of Luke and Matthew, and was sent by God to redeem humanity. On the Nebuchadnezzar’s plaque is the engraving “Mark III No. 11” which corresponds to the bible verse Mark 3:11, “And whenever unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, ‘You are the Son of God’.” Morpheus acts as a kind of John the Baptist figure in the film, “baptizing” Neo when he rescues Neo from the water into the ship after being unplugged. John baptized Jesus who was immediately told by a spirit from Heaven that he was the Son of God and it marks the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Neo also mirrors Jesus’ death and resurrection, proving his holiness (Jesus, notably, was resurrected 3 days after his death at the age of 33 – there’s that number again). In addition, **The Matrix** was released on the Easter weekend in 1999, not likely a coincidence (and 9 is three 3s, and there are three 9s in 1999...). Obviously, however, for all the intended similarities, **The Matrix** never quite equates Neo with Jesus. Neo isn’t exactly the “Lamb of God,” and you won’t find “Guns. Lots of guns.” anywhere in the gospel. Rather than “turning the other cheek” and forgiving the people still plugged into the Matrix who “know not what they do,” Neo is quite willing to be violent, and there’s no moral concern about it. In fact, considering the heavy reliance on religious faiths, there is a distinct absence of any treatment of “sin.” Neo more closely resembles Jesus in the bible’s chapter Revelations, with Jesus’ second coming – and Neo is a “second coming” as well – Jesus is no longer a lamb but a lion who will “smite the nations” and has eyes of flame and blood-stained robes.

Another discrepancy is the concept of the sensory world being illusory, this is rejected by Christian theology, as Gregory Bassham points out, because “[it’s] inconsistent with the existence of an all-powerful and truthful God.” Illusions and deception are the tools of Satan. Another problem is the illusory nature of time in the film. Time in the Matrix is another non-signifying symbol – it is perpetually 1999, where in reality it’s 2199. In such a programmed reality, time and duration are subjective impressions rather than empirical realities. The Christian tradition believes in the absolute reality of time which is

only and always progressive and linear. The world is something like a great big count-down clock to the Last Judgement. By contrast, the suggestion the world is an illusion is a familiar concept in many Eastern religions. As is the looping, circular nature of time: this belief is seen in concepts like karma and reincarnation. Linear time is a perception, and the



continually repeating present moment is the only real time that exists, thus we record time with clocks and calendars for purposes that have nothing to do with time's actual nature. And lending to the importance of Eastern religions in the film, the Wachowskis have described ***The Matrix*** as the search for "the reincarnation of Buddha." There is also a distinct influence from Gnosticism. Gnostic beliefs hold that the physical world was not created by God but by an imperfect "demiurge," a kind of architect, and so the world is also imperfect. In the Gnostic tradition salvation from this imperfect world comes from intuition and instincts.

That religious and spiritual beliefs would be aligned with reality in the film makes sense – faith is often touted as the ultimate source of meaning in life. Yet reality cannot fully rest here as the film never commits to a *particular* religion, and the plurality of religious traditions the film references often contradict each other. This does not go unnoticed by Bassham who argues that pluralism, the belief that all religions are equally "valid and true," is not a tenable position. He suggests it may work as "an exercise in contemporary myth-making" but seems to dismiss the film as the Wachowskis wanting to "make a kick-ass intellectual action movie that features some interesting and relevant myths." The point here does not seem to be making references to Christianity, for example, to say that Neo is Jesus, because he is only *like* him. Rather it seems as if the film references different religions because they are the dominant system, or reference point, for how we make sense of the world, reality, and our place within it. The film also seems disinterested in getting caught up in the particulars of dogma: strict rules of any kind are intellectual and spiritual limitations in the film. The commonality between all religions, regardless of the exact doctrine, the film is interested in exploring is that there is more to the world we live in than what we can see, and more to ourselves. When asked about the role of the various faiths in the film, the Wachowskis emphasized that "faith in oneself" is the film's central wisdom. So rather than consider the entrapment of the physical body in a physical world, the real purpose of religious references in the film seems to be to evoke the limitless potential of a spiritual self in an ethereal world. The Matrix itself doesn't change whether Neo is plugged into it or unplugged, rather Neo's *perception* of what is possible in that world is what changes when he realizes it is a world "built on rules" whereas he is not. The role of spirituality in the film is to separate and underline the difference between the notion of reality which connotes deceptive, external, sense perception versus Reality as truth, revelation, consciousness and spiritual perception.



The film deviates from Baudrillard into the realm of dreams and spirituality not because the Wachowskis misunderstand Baudrillard, but because they do not wish to lose the reality of the self in the total loss of external reality. In this way the film is probably closer to the philosophy of René Descartes. Like Baudrillard, Descartes distrusts the notion of external reality. In his pursuit of discovering the nature of absolute truth, Descartes systematically rejects any idea or reasoning that can be doubted (he assumes truth is self-evident). Like Morpheus, Descartes deduces he cannot rely on his senses or his body to experience reality as his senses can be deceived and even fail. Ultimately, he concludes that the only thing he cannot doubt is that someone or something within him is doubting: *thought exists*, leading to his most famous “Cogito ergo sum”: “I think therefore I am.” For Descartes, the only indisputable truth is that he is a thinking being, consciousness, whereas everything else is potentially deceitful. Baudrillard would not likely argue that the self is unreal, but he does hold that any search for total, absolute meaning is destined to fail. What makes Baudrillard particularly relevant to the film is his exploration of how we experience, or don’t experience, reality through virtual technologies – a philosophical consideration far from Descartes’s consciousness in the 17th century. However, both Descartes and the film would agree with Baudrillard’s contention that ultimate, unchanging meaning cannot be found at all. Another important intertext in ***The Matrix*** that begins to make sense of this “contradiction” of Baudrillard is Lewis Carroll’s Alice novels: *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. Like Baudrillard, Alice is referenced explicitly in the film several times, first when the mysterious message on Neo’s computer tells him to “Follow the white rabbit.” In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice follows a curious looking white rabbit wearing a vest and a pocket watch into a rabbit hole and discovers the fantastical Wonderland. Neo mimics Alice’s curiosity, he encounters a woman with a white rabbit tattoo and following her and her friends to a club meets Trinity, eventually leading him to the revelation of the nature of the world. Like Neo discovering the “liquidation of referentials” that makes up the world he believes is real, the world of signs that points only to other signs and never to truth, as soon as Alice enters Wonderland her expectations of reality are also shaken. Alice spends a very long time “falling” down the rabbit hole and realizes the walls of the hole are lined with shelves and various items. From one of the shelves she picks up a jar labelled “ORANGE

MARMALADE” and opens it, “but to her great disappointment it [is] empty.” How reasonable it seems to expect labels to point to what they seem to signify – but over and over they reveal themselves as signifying nothing, literal emptiness.

Throughout her adventures in Wonderland, Alice discovers again and again that signs and referents are not always related or attached to one another. There is an uncertainty about meaning in Wonderland, the ordinary isn’t ordinary at all: watches are dipped in tea and have butter spread over their gears, cats have glowing smiles and disappear, rabbits wear clothing and cards are soldiers, time itself is a “self” that keeps very bad time indeed, the Hatter’s watch is exactly “Two days wrong!” Wonderland seems to be strung together with word games and puns. After swimming through a pool (of tears), the Mouse tells Alice and the other drenched creatures he’ll make them “dry enough” and says, “This is the driest thing I know. ... William the Conqueror, whose cause was favoured by the pope, was soon



submitted to by the English, who wanted leaders...” Alice asks to hear a tale from a mouse and the story is printed on the page in the shape of a tail. In her conversation with the Cheshire Cat, space itself becomes non-referential as he insists that “somewhere” is a place “if you only walk long enough.” In *Through the Looking Glass* there are repeated references to “Somebody” and “Nobody” being real people. This slippery-ness of language is shown in her conversation with the Mock Turtle who says to her “No wise fish would go anywhere without a porpoise ... if a fish came to me, and told me he was going on a journey, I should say ‘With what porpoise?’” to which Alice, reasonably, asks, “Don’t you mean ‘purpose’?” but the Mock Turtle is offended by this question and says, “I mean what I say,” an oft repeated line in the books. When she encounters Humpty Dumpty the “liquidation of referentials” becomes clear, thinking she’s correcting Humpty Alice points out to him “But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument’” and Humpty replies, “When I use a word ... it means just what I choose it to mean.”



What the “liquidation of referentials” seems to reference is the absence of *essential* meaning. This liquidation presents a strange paradox, as Alice visits with the Hatter and March Hare she is struck by how much of the conversation has “no sort of meaning in it, and yet it [is] certainly English.” The non-signifying sign has the perplexing character of *meaning* nothing yet being understood. This is precisely the trait that allows the simulacrum to hide that there is no reality, no truth, and no meaning: everything *seems* real *enough* on the surface that we do not see there is nothing underneath. The simulacrum hides the absence of reality behind pseudo-meaning: signs appear to reference meaning so we accept them as meaningful (ironically the film itself is very often charged with appearing to be deep but without actual depth, one particularly unimpressed critic argues it’s “under-graduate philosophizing” and little else). The world Neo lives in looks like the world and thus he assumes it is so. This is precisely how language works. A language is made up of words, which are individual signs (and the letters that make up each word are individual signs too, representing enunciations). But the meanings of words only point to other signs, usually also words. Consider a dictionary, when you want to learn the meaning of a word you look it up and the dictionary offers you other words that explain their way around the word you don’t understand with words you hopefully do understand. It is still a very big mystery to me how anyone learns any language at all, really. In fact, semioticians (those are smart people who study sign systems like language for a living) habitually teach that the meaning of signs (be it a word or an actual sign like a stop sign) are socially agreed upon, and the meaning of any given sign can, and often does, change dramatically over time and across cultures: meaning is only ever relative, not inherent. To take a relevant example, the word ‘terrorist’ in 1999 meant something very different than it did by 2003 – so when ‘terrorist’ is used to describe Morpheus in *The Matrix* by Agent Smith in 1999 it went unnoticed, but by the time the two sequels were released, well after 9/11, the philosophical continuity across the films is majorly disrupted by a lot of backtracking to redefine Morpheus & Co. as freedom-fighters instead (and hence why I generally disregard

the sequels as related in any way other than incidentally to the first film – they get caught up in the semantic nonsense the first film completely undermines). While meaning may reveal itself to be flexible, Descartes's belief in the reality of thought itself and the thinking being turns the lack of essential meaning in the world to a source of freedom. Instead of meaning being dictated into the mind, thought is free to interpret in a state of limitlessness. Turns out Humpty Dumpty making words mean what he chooses to make them mean is a rather serious piece of nonsense, and the ultimate seat of meaning is not a solid relationship to outside reality but simply that the speaker means what they say.



The importance of perception in the film is underlined by the motif of eyes and sunglasses. All of the principle characters wear sunglasses, but notably only while in the Matrix or the Construct. Sunglasses are removed in moments when the speaker wants to emphasize being heard, or to be honest – for instance Agent Smith removes his glasses while interrogating Neo near the beginning of the film to appeal to him to choose helping them locate Morpheus, and later when he is trying to convince Morpheus to give up the Zion codes since he's so desperate to escape the Matrix. Also, eyes are not visible through any of the sunglasses as they all have reflective lenses that act like mirrors. The reflective lenses mirror the disrupted relationship between signs and referents. Exposed eyes and eye contact are related in the film to truth, authenticity, even “reality” (windows to the soul after all). The reflective lenses covering the eyes are like signs pointing towards the eyes without revealing them, instead the lenses reflect the image of whatever, or *whoever*, is standing in front of them. The most remarkable instance of this occurs when Morpheus offers Neo the choice between the red pill and the blue pill. Each pill is reflected in a each eyeglass frame along with Neo in each frame, not only laying out his choice of pills, but literally a choice of perception. Taking the blue pill would mean “the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe,” whereas taking the red pill means “[staying] in Wonderland” and finding out “how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

If reflections represent perceptions, then the breaking of reflections seem to represent a shift in perception. Directly after Neo makes his choice of the red pill he looks into a broken mirror which ultimately “melts” onto him leading to his being unplugged from the Matrix and learning the true nature of the world and his old life. Later when Neo saves

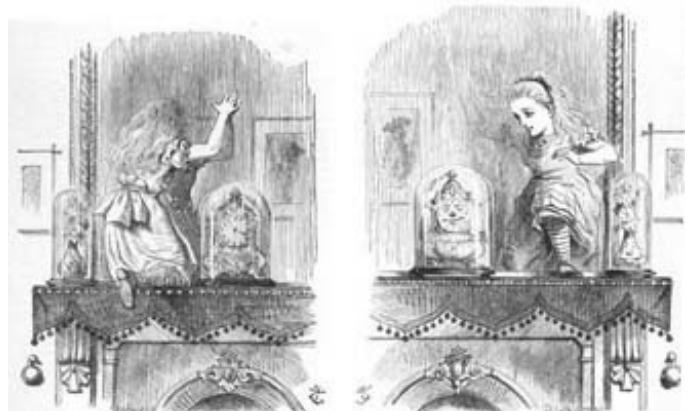
Trinity from the falling helicopter, the helicopter smashes the reflective glass of the adjacent building, and when Trinity is safe Morpheus suggests to Neo he is indeed The One: “Do you believe it now?” Similarly, during the subway fight between Neo and Agent Smith, Neo breaks one of the lenses on Agent Smith’s glasses. As he takes the glasses off he says “I’m going to enjoy watching you die, Mr. Anderson.” Neo shortly corrects him “My name is Neo.” and it marks the beginning of Agent Smith’s realization that Neo is The One which brings with it Agent Smith’s destruction.

The broken mirror which “melts” and leads to Neo his awakening outside of the Matrix is a direct reference to Lewis Carroll’s novel *Through the Looking Glass* where Alice enters Looking-Glass Land through a mirror whose glass appears to “melt away.” The significance of mirrors and reflections is not just related to the theme of perception, but also the film’s philosophies about prophecy, destiny and fate. The major shift in Neo’s perception occurs not only when he learns of the illusion in which he had lived his life, but also with his awareness he is The One. Prophecies play an important role in the film, and the prophecies given to Morpheus, Trinity, and Neo all eventually coincide. Prophecies create a mirroring of time: a prediction about the future is only possible from the point of view that fate exists. That is, it becomes possible to accurately prophesize the future only if future events are predestined, in some ways it’s as if the future has already happened. The core prophecy driving ***The Matrix***’s narrative is that Neo is The One, a reincarnation of a man born years before him and who unplugged the first humans from the Matrix, and that Neo’s rebirth will save humankind by destroying the Matrix. The past, that Neo is a reincarnation of the first One, and the future, that Neo is The One, are folded into the present, but the present is mirrored into the future as well. When Neo meets the Oracle, standing in the kitchen doorway, she slyly says to him “Don’t worry about the vase.” Turning around asking “What vase?” Neo knocks one off the table breaking it. The Oracle teases him “what’s really going to bake your noodle later on is would you still have broken it if I hadn’t said anything.” Once Neo’s destiny is fulfilled it seems to be precisely because he heard the prophecy of his choice between his



own life and saving Morpheus, as it instilled in him the conviction that he would succeed in saving Morpheus if he is willing to sacrifice himself. The mirroring of the future, present and past, where the beginning is the end and the end is the beginning, is a structural pattern in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*: chapters 4, 6 and 7 begin with short poems that predict the chapter's ending – but then, Alice is *inside* the mirror after all, and so is Neo. ***The Matrix*** also displays this structural mirroring pattern as the film opens and closes with similar sequences. The film begins with bright green type on a black screen, it's a computer screen that reads "Trace Program: running." Trinity is then seen in Room 303 in the Heart O' the City Hotel, and after the Agent's destroy the phone booth Trinity narrowly escapes through, the camera dives into the speaker of the phone and reveals Neo asleep at his desk. The close of the film is a near mirror image: Neo returns to Room 303 in the Heart O' the City Hotel, shortly another "Trace program: running" screen appears (although this time there is a "SYSTEM FAILURE"), and the camera recedes from a phone speaker to reveal Neo, profoundly awake, right before he flies away.

Narratively, the film engages this concept with foreshadowing. In Neo's first scene in the film, he answers his apartment door to find Choi who says to him "Hallelujah. You're my saviour man. My own personal Jesus Christ." Choi also says to Neo "You don't exist ... you might need to unplug, man." Choi foreshadows what's to come: the revelation of the illusory nature of existence, and Neo being "unplugged" from the Matrix and becoming a saviour. When Neo shows up late for work the next day his self-important boss, who looks remarkably like an Agent, chides him: "You have a problem with authority, Mr. Anderson. You believe that you are special, that somehow the rules do not apply to you. ... The time



has come to make a choice.” His boss accurately predicts the choice Neo will be given, between keeping his job by taking the blue pill, or finding another life by taking the red pill, but he also predicts Neo’s “specialness” as The One and that the rules will not actually apply to him, and in no small measure Neo’s “problem with authority” regarding the Matrix in general, but specifically the Agents (he does refer to them as Nazis when Agent Smith interrogates him). Even Neo’s office building foreshadows his escape from the limitations of the physical world: not only does the building itself resemble a spinal cord, the name ‘Metacortex’ translates to ‘going beyond’ (meta) ‘the outer layer of gray matter in the cerebrum of the brain’ (cortex) – literally transcending the brain.

The film, however, is careful not to confuse fate with programming as there is an emphasis on free will – Neo is repeatedly confronted with opportunities to make choices.

Additionally, Neo’s destiny in the film to incarnate as The One is a spiritual concept – since Neo as The One is so closely tied to Christian traditions and other religious beliefs – whereas programming would suggest Neo’s fate (and everyone else’s) is coded in the Matrix software. The concepts of fate and programming are no doubt very similar, but ultimately are not alike at all. Neo’s destiny is riddled with cross-

roads that could have prevented or at least postponed its fulfillment, Neo could have betrayed Morpheus to the Agents, could have taken the blue pill, and could have allowed Tank to unplug Morpheus when he was being interrogated by the Agents. And the Oracle’s suggestion with the vase that prophecies may be at heart “self-fulfilling” supports the role of freewill in fate. By contrast, there is no freewill whatsoever in programming. Neo’s life plugged into the Matrix has a mundane, “rat race” quality to it. This is suggested aesthetically by the desperately obsessive box patterns to the Matrix sets. Neo sits listlessly in his cubicle (the term itself suggesting confinement) as the only figure in the frame not made up of straight lines and hard edges. The room where the Agents interrogate Neo, and the room where they interrogate Morpheus are both boxes within boxes within boxes:





As opposed to Neo who has a destiny, Agent Smith has a program (well, he *is* a program), and he feels the difference, as he tells Morpheus: “I must get out of here. I must get free. And in this mind is the key. My key. Once Zion is destroyed there’s no need for me to be here, do you understand?” In addition, Neo’s apartment in the Matrix is room number 101, 1s and 0s make up the language of computer programming. Room 101 is also a reference to George Orwell’s novel *1984*, named after a BBC office where Orwell had to endure painfully tedious meetings, and in his novel Room 101 is a torture chamber where the prisoner is subjected to his own worst fears. So if fate is a path, programming is a trap – here the film shows the shadow of Karl Marx’s influence: programming in the Matrix is the worst kind of trap because it provides a life experience tolerable enough that its oppressive nature remains invisible. Morpheus tells Neo it is “a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch” and it appears only as a “splinter” in the mind, an intuitive sense that there’s something not-quite-right about the world, but only if you’re sensitive enough or willing to acknowledge it. Programming is a prison that keeps you from your true self, but fate is the mirror of the future into the present that allows you to recognize yourself. In the Matrix the closest thing is déjà-vu which has nothing to do with finding yourself, but is a glitch – and it does literally trap them in the building. But destiny is self-recognition: is that not what mirrors are for? Neo is not destined to “find” something, “go” anywhere, or specifically “do” anything, he is destined to *be* The One. Or more accurately, he is destined to realize what he *already is*: the Oracle, after all, tells him “you’ve *got* the gift, but it looks like you’re waiting for something.” Prophecies are a matter of recognition too: Neo’s fate appears to

him before he's ready to accept it so he recognizes it is truth when it appears to him again. As self-recognition, destiny is the ultimate referent to the self, your life's purpose is also its meaning. The film's focus on mirrors, reflections and mirroring suggest that the sign may efface the thing, but to the extent of underlining that we never see the thing, rather, we always, and perhaps only, see ourselves. Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek suggests the film itself functions this way, calling it a philosophical "Rorschach inkblot test" that "[sets] in motion the universalized process of recognition, like the proverbial painting of God which always seems to stare directly at you, from wherever you look at it – practically every orientation seems to recognize itself in it." Or as French-Cuban author Anaïs Nin says so eloquently: "We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are."

Destiny is explicitly linked to self-recognition when Neo meets the Oracle. The Oracle asks Neo if he believes he is The One, and when he responds that he honestly doesn't know she points to a sign over her kitchen door. Painted on the sign is the Latin for "Know Thyself." This was also one of three phrases inscribed in the temple where the Oracle of Delphi resided in Greek mythology. Essentially, "Know Thyself" is the counsel of the film, but the film also underlines both the difficulty and absolute necessity of knowing yourself in the absence of reality. Alice in Lewis Carroll's novels engage this concept as



well: both Wonderland and Looking-Glass Land are dream worlds, in fact Carroll completes *Through the Looking-Glass* with a poem that closes with "Lingering in a golden gleam – / Life, what is it but a dream?" The curious thing about Alice is, not unlike Neo who "accepts what he sees because he's expecting to wake up," the strange nature of Wonderland doesn't make her question its reality, she only notes that "everything is queer today." Instead, Alice questions herself and the nature of her identity: "yesterday things went on just as usual, I wonder if I've changed in the night? Let me think: *was* I the same when I got up this morning? ... But if I'm not the same, the next question is 'Who in the world am I? Ah, *that's* the great puzzle.'" Alice's uncertainty about her identity is most clearly seen when she meets the cryptic Caterpillar who presses her for an answer to the question "Who are you?" Rather than answer with the non-signifying but common response of simply her name, Alice replies, "I hardly know Sir, just at present – at least I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have changed several times since then." The Caterpillar doesn't quite get what Alice means and demands "Explain

yourself!” to which Alice insightfully replies, “I can’t explain *myself* ... because I’m not myself, you see.” Neo also questions his identity when he returns to the Matrix for the first time after being unplugged and learning the truth about the ‘real world’ being an illusion. In the car on the way to see the Oracle, he points to a restaurant they pass and says to Trinity, “I used to eat there. Really good noodles. I have these memories from my life. None of them happened. What does that mean?” Like Alice whose constant shape-shifting and changes in perspective make her question her own identity, Neo’s realization that his past was an illusion also makes him question his. Notably, the shot of Neo in the car begins with a close up of his, green tinted, reflection on the car window and the camera subsequently tracks back to reveal him. This suggests the person who used to live in the world was also just a reflection of himself, not his real self, and yet it’s all he knows. Much of Neo’s doubt and struggle is having to re-adjust his self-concept to this new ‘context’ and understanding of himself and the world.

A similar exercise is seen in ***Dark City***. In ***Dark City***, an ancient race of beings called “the Strangers” have mastered the ability to manipulate physical reality by will alone, an ability they call “tuning,” but as a race they are dying. Seeking a cure for their mortality they hope understanding the human soul will save their own kind, so they created a giant city and abducted many humans and conduct experiments. Every night they alter the physical layout of the city, and by putting the humans into a type of sleep each night at midnight when they do these tunings, also trade memories and identities between people and observe the results, hoping to pinpoint the human soul. John Murdoch is one of the trapped humans who wakes up after a failed “memory transfer,” which causes total amnesia, to discover he is apparently a serial killer and is being chased by both the police and the Strangers who want to correct their mistake. John initially searches for his identity by seeking to remember his past, as Dr. Schreber tell John’s wife, “Wherever your husband is, he is searching – for himself.” John follows



clues from vague memories that slowly come back to him, ultimately looking for Shell Beach which he recalls as where he grew up and believes it holds the essence of his identity – but no one can remember how to get there, in fact Shell Beach doesn't actually exist (the film's intensely familiar sign with no referent). And the city itself is a completely enclosed, free-floating planet, which from above looks like a circular labyrinth, much like the Matrix city where there's no sign of exit or nature. Slowly John begins to realize that something isn't quite right with this world, he no longer sleeps during the tunings at night and sees how the Strangers swap memories between its citizens. The police officer, Inspector Bumstead, chasing John also begins to discover the truth, first when he consults a retired officer, Detective Walenski, who appears to be going mad. Det. Walenski tells the Inspector "I've just been spending time on the subway, riding in circles, thinking in circles. There's no way out ... See, I've been trying to remember things, *clearly* remember things from my past. But the more I try to think back, the more it all starts to unravel. None of it seems real. It's like I've just been dreaming this life, and when I finally wake up I'll be somebody else. Somebody totally different." Part of what leads John to the revelation of the true nature of the city is his refusal, like Det. Walenski, to take the world at face value, and with his memory being erased he's left with only himself: the evidence he has found tells him he is a killer, so he visits a prostitute, as he explains to his wife, "I wanted to test myself. I wanted to know if I had it in me to do those things." Without the pressure of memory vying for reality he realizes, "Maybe I have lost my mind, but whoever I am, I'm still me, and I'm not a killer."



Trinity suggests something similar to Neo after he asks her what it means that his memories and the life he remembers aren't real, and she replies simply, "That the Matrix cannot tell you who you are." Identity becomes a problem in an "illusory world" because we tend to



define ourselves in relation to the world we live in: we know ourselves pragmatically, rather than intrinsically. We know who we are in context: we know ourselves in this body, answering to this name in this time and place while our world is familiar. We track a certain continuity of identity based on the cause and effect relationships of the past events in our lives, our memories, and believe it's the sum of who we are. But believing too literally in the linear, progressive nature of time is another way in which we only recognize ourselves pragmatically, or in the case of time, syntactically. We don't really know *ourselves*, we know our *place* and mistake it for Self. This



mistake is precisely what makes Neo's transition between the simulacrum of the Matrix and the reality of being unplugged so uncomfortable. And it is precisely what causes Alice's confusion when the Caterpillar asks her who she is: when the Caterpillar refuses to understand her ambiguity about her identity she tries to explain, "I'm afraid I can't put it more clearly ... for I can't understand it myself ... being so many different sizes in a day is confusing" but the Caterpillar replies simply, and wisely, "It isn't." The Caterpillar insists Alice should know and recognize herself regardless of how her body or world changes. And this is Neo's lesson too: "knowing" yourself pragmatically, defining the self from the outside in, by things as non-signifying as a job title, a country of birth, and a given name in an *illusory world* is not to know yourself at all. Pragmatic identities are illusions, they do not exist, they are not real, and they signify *nothing*. As John tells the Stranger Mr. Hand, the Strangers made a mistake looking for the human soul in memories, John points to his forehead and says "You're not going to find [the soul] in here. You were looking in the wrong place."



What exactly does it mean to know yourself? How do you escape pragmatic identity? Head over to [Part 2](#) to find out...